

“Everything is Change.”

Asma and Taylor

“Everything Is Change.”

[There is no one place to begin a story. But we had to start somewhere. This is where Asma and I finally decided to begin. In a Tim Horton’s, with a terrible soundtrack and an obnoxiously loud smoothie machine. The late-afternoon sunlight was lovely, though. After a short discussion, we finally settled on beginning with her childhood. The following selections come from a collection of conversations that begin to paint a picture of Asma’s early life.]

T: Um... But, yeah, I-I think—if you could, if you have time, if you wanted to think about it, you can tell your story in whatever order you want.

A: Yeah.

T: Um, so, we don’t have to make a set plan. If you—decide what you *feel* like you need to tell me first. If you—if you’re gonna tell me your story, you’re gonna tell me your story how *you* think it’s best to start.

A: Yeah. Okay. Now, we, we leave each other today...

T: Yeah.

A: Um, I’m going to start for myself—introduce myself...

T Yeah.

A: And.... And then after that if you give me a question, like, “Where are you from?” Just like that, I can start first where I grew up...

T: Okay.

A: And then the experience I have in Syria, the experience I have in United States.

T: Okay.

A: My kids.

T: Okay. Do you think you wanna go in that order?

A: Or maybe, or maybe, um I’m gonna start first mine, and then, ah back to Somalia, and [draws out the vowel sound], continue to United States. And then, go to my mom, and last, is, maybe my family. And, the way I live.

T: Okay. It’s up to you. It’s up to you.

A: Yeah.

T: I think...

A: Yeah, you—we can help each other—

T: Yeah—

A: —to order the way we start it, but if you wanted for the beginning, I can start for the beginning. Introduce myself, where I'm from, um, the way I grew up, um... The way I... Yeah.

[fade]

A: When I born, it was so beautiful, everything.

[But that beauty can change.]

A: Yes. I know how quickly it can. Because I born in, I born [date]. My country was very beautiful, much better than what they something in today. And when I was my age like [Muhammad], everything was change. Everything is change.

[Change was a constant theme in Asma's early life in Somalia, where a civil war has raged on and off for decades. After her father died when she was very young, Asma's mother moved her and her three younger sisters constantly. "Home" for Asma could not be a place, but a state of mind.]

A: I was like, "I don't like this place. Let's go home." And home is not safe.

T: Yeah. So what, what is home for you? Is it that beautiful house on the beach?

A: I don't have a home. One home. The only home I remember, I like it, when they *never* have the bad things—it was our, our new house.

T: The one by the beach?

A: They one my dad built, yeah. That—that one I call house. But it's not—it's a ghost house.

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah. Yeah. I don't have a, I don't have a... What I call home? Is maybe all city...

T: The whole city?

A: [laughs] The whole city. Because I went to different, different places. Even the farm, even the—out the city, even—oh, my lord.

T: So did you stay in and around Mogadishu, or did you move all around the country? Or did you stay near the city?

A: Around, around—I think, um.... We moved around the—around Mogadishu.

T: Mhm.

A: And out of Mogadishu twice, I think.

T: Yeah?

A: Out Mogadishu twice. Once, one day, we went to city, we call her Afgooye?

T: You went to another city?

A: Yeah.

T: Called Afgooye?

A: Yeah. It's, it's close to Mogadishu, but we can't, we can't call it Mogadishu. It's Afgooye.

[pause]

T: Do you remember the other one?

A: Which one?

T: The other city?

A: The other city...I don't remember where, where else. But I remember we went out the city, yeah.

T: But you tended to stay in and around Mogadishu.

[fade]

A: But Afgooye, I remember. Yeah, Afgooye I remember.

T: Yeah. How old were you when you were there?

A: Ah, I don't know. It was my age, but I do remember a little bit, like a picture, I told you? I do remember like pictures, and Afgooye—my, uh, my old uncle—even older my mom. He's older than my, my mom.

T: So he's you mom's oldest brother.

A: Yes. My mom's oldest brother, he live there, he have a wife and kids, and we went to there... And we love something, is very beautiful. He used to bring us a lot of fruit when he come to the Mogadishu, my uncle.

T: Mhm.

A: He goes the place he live is a lot of raining.

T: Yeah?

A: They have a, they have a river. They have a river. They-they live close to river, and then that will give them water to...to farm, grow, grow, grow the fruit.

T: Yeah.

A: Like banana, is the place banana grow up in Mogadishu, banana...

T: Yeah.

A: Somali banana grow up there. Um...um...Eh pie... You know the pie? Pumpkin pie? You know it?

T: Oh, pumpkins?

A: Yeah, we call them “pie.” Pumpkins, they come from Afgooye. Oranges, they come from Afgooye, um...Banana come from Afgooye. Um...what else? Coconut.

T: Coconut?

A: Yes! Coconut come there! And oh my gosh, I remember one day my uncle he bring a big bag for the fruits—different fruits? He used to bring a lot of fruits when he come to the city. [...] And then the water for the coconut, he used to say, “You want to drink it?” And so we, we used to taste it, and we love it.

T: Yeah?

A: Yeah. That day we don’t eat food. We just eat the fruit.

T: Just the fruit. Yeah.

A: Delicious fruit. On time, just like...We eat so much. And we don’t have a [refrigerator]. We don’t eat it, next day it’s gonna be bad.

T: It’s gonna go bad.

A: So we don’t cook that day. We just eat fruit [laughs].

T: That’s so funny. So when you were in Afgooye, were those happy memories?

A: It was, yeah. Afgooye is the, is the, is the launch little bit, it’s um, it’s not the like the village? They have a lot of, lot of houses, streets, they have malls—not malls, [??] malls, but they have a place to shop, the foods?

T: Like...yeah. Like...

A: Kroger or sometimes... It’s yeah...

T: Like markets.

A: Markets, yeah. They have a open markets, outside. Yeah.

T: Yeah.

A: [chuckles] They don’t have somewhere to close it, no its open markets. You walk and shop.

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah, and we used to go to markets to shop. It’s a big place, open, fruits, a lot of things. And yeah, but he never took us for the, for the place, the...the fruits come—

T: He didn’t take you to the farm?

A: No, he didn’t take us to the farm because farm was little bit farther than the place they live?

T: Okay.

A: So, we, we used to saw, while we were crossing houses and going to the markets, we see the something is coming, like people is making small place in their own house? Yeah, like something is coming like natural fruit.

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah, so it was beautiful. Everything is green.

T: Yeah?

A: Yeah. The tree...everything is natural, everything is green. So...yeah, it was beautiful. And he have a big house, so everyone, we were mostly busy at the house.

T: That's fun!

A: Yeah, it was fun. It was beautiful. [picks up her baby] Yeah, it was fun. But every, every place I go, I have a, I have a memory like a scan, scan memory, just...

T: Like little images...

A: Little images, yeah, I don't have a lot of images, I don't remember a lot of images, just like a small, like...

T: Like snapshots.

A: Yes! I don't know why, I don't remember. Sometime my mom on the farm, these days, she ask me...

T: So your mom would be calling you, and she would ask if you remembered things? And you wouldn't remember them?

A: No, I—my mom, I call her sometimes, she calls me sometimes, and by accident, maybe she ask me, and we talk we talk we talk, and maybe she brings name.

T: Yeah.

A: She say, "Who is this?" "I don't know!" She say, "You don't remember?" I say, "No, I don't remember who was. I think I remember the name, but I don't know who is that person."

T: Yeah.

A: My mom say, "Oh, my gosh. I remember, I'm older than you, you don't remember nothing." I say, "Maybe I was there that day, focusing on something else."

T: Yeah.

[That is how Asma shared her stories—snapshot-like memories that presented a life moving forward in fits and starts.]

T: So you don't have...Do you have any vivid or favorite memories from your childhood?

A: Eh. Some are painful, some are fun.

T: Yeah?

A: Yeah. So... If you grow up one place, you can see the life one style. But if you grow up in a different place, your lifestyle is, is just like a season. It's just like a season, every year you have like a crazy season, so... When the people have two season in the year, maybe three season, you have it a more different. Yeah.

T: Did you like that?

A: I don't.

T: You did not like moving?

A: It's very hard. Like I told you if, eh, you move to North Carolina one year, and Chicago two years, Ohio one year, it's like... You have more experience, but like can confuse sometimes the accents, the cultures, even the food is changed.

T: Yeah?

A: Yeah. [laughs] Yeah. Even that is crazy. This is the first time I stay ten years. Now eleven years, I think. It's the first time I stay ten years, same place.

T: You like that?

A: I like it! So you can focus whatever you want in this life, but if you're moving in different direction, you don't have one focus, you have a crazy mind. Every time you think something, pfft, it's gone. [laughs] You think something, and ah! Your plan, it's just blowed up, blowed up, you don't have it. So yeah. I am, uh, I am so happy but there is one memory when I was, uh, a, I think a ten years old, I like to remember that memory. And sometimes I like to share the school, or maybe I'm in the house, with my husband, or maybe I'm with someone new, meeting me, I like to share when I was ten years [laughs].

T: Okay!

A: We left the city. There was crazy, crazy, crazy fighting. Um...

T: You left Mogadishu?

A: Yeah, we left Mogadishu. We left Mogadishu because, um, there's no... There's no place to stay in Mogadishu because there's two, there's to groups there fighting, crazy, and people were dying for no reason. Um, I left there, we went, um... My mom, she had a sibling, eh—no, she had a stepfather. She had a sibling, but that sibling is not, uh, they're only... They're, they're same mom but not same father. So we went to my mom's stepfather. His, his house, but that's a farm. You know that?

T: A farm? Yeah!

A: That's a farm place, we never went to farm. We were just born in Mogadishu, grew up in Mogadishu, a little bit, we never went to farm.

T: Mhm.

A: I'm talking too much. [laughs sheepishly]

T: No, no! You're not talking too much at all! You're *supposed* to be talking too much! [laughs]

A: Okay, so I went there, with whole, whole house we moved there.

T: Mhm.

A: So we don't have no much clothes, clothes, we don't have nothing. We just run away like the clothes we have it. And my oldest sister, my oldest sister, she had it...Not my oldest sister, but my mom's sister, she have one sister, my mom's sister have kids, so that kids live at the farm. So I call her sister because she is... my auntie, right?

T: Yeah.

A: So how do you call my sister...cousin?

T: Her kids are your cousins.

A: Cousins, yes. But we my country we call them sister.

T: Sisters.

A: Yeah, it's like my sister, because she's my mom's sister. She's older, for his family, so she's the old kids, so she'd say, "Okay, let's go, we gonna make some, ah, farm." Farm, like a... When the people um...

T: Like when you work in the soil?

A: Yes. So, they dig in a little bit, dig in a line, not a big line, maybe big as this house, and they dig in and they put in some foods.

T: Seeds?

A: Like beans, seeds, yeah, they put 'em there. She say, "I'm gonna show you something to do today, let's go." Me, and my, uh, second sister, my younger, but not my last one, my younger one. We went there. And after we went there, she say, "Okay." She give us something to dig in the the, floor." So we dig it, and we put in some foods, and I watch it, I watch it, I watch it, I watch it. I say, "Okay, so we dig hole to put in something, but I need, place my own." She say, "Okay, you want a place your own." So we have a, a neighbor...when we was in the city, in Mogadishu, we... My family, and a neighbor, neighbor boy. We went there together, because, um our neighbor has two sons. With two sons, she, the younger one is like my age, the older one, he stay with her. The younger one is like my age, so we kinda like, ah, we are kind of like family.

[fade]

A: And he say, "Okay, me and [Asma] we want to share. We can play, we can, we can play. We can practice."

T: You want your own little plot of land.

A: Yes, yes, to practice, like things like that.

T: Yeah.

A: And after that she say, “Okay,” and she make it like that, a map, and she say, “Okay, this is you guys’, yours.”

T: Yep.

A: And she told him, my grandpa, my grandpa, she told him, “Okay, I’m gonna give them this place, they wanna play their own, they wanna do their own...” And he say, “Okay.” So the next day, morning, we wake up, we wake up before the others get up. We went to the kitchen—they don’t have a kitchen, but they have a place where they put the foods—not exactly kitchen...

T: Yeah.

A: There are, large amounts, plastic bag, sugar?

T: Mhm

A: Eh, rice, something like that.

T: Mhm.

A: And we take the foods in that. So, we went to there, we put the sugar, our hands [cups her hands], and we put our pockets.

T: Yeah.

A: Our pockets is full of sugar, and we left the house. We went to that farm, and we dig the, um, the—the la—in the floor, and we put the sugar in... [A mimes the action, T laughs]. And we cover it, we cover it, we, we are waiting for, like the same thing to grow up, the, the sugar.

T: Yep.

A: Because always we say, “Milk...with sugar. Rice...with sugar.”

T: Yeah.

A: Because there is no food...we like it in the house. It’s a little bit far, so everything we eat is taste different, so we order sugar.

T: Yeah.

[fade]

A: So, sugar, it was the important thing we wanted, we wanted more.

T: You wanted more.

A: So we say, if this, if this box, if this box of sugar is gone, so we can have another sugar...

T: Yeah.

A: We can, we can put the sugar there.

T: Yeah. That is so funny.

A: Yeah. And then after few days, the plants, the seeds, everything is growing, like *small*, small, and then they say, “Don’t step on—something coming! In the, the things we put in the, in the dirt is growing!” So we look at our land and nothing is growing [we laugh]. We open it...there’s nothing! There is the rain come, and everything get mess.

[fade]

A: Then finally, we cannot hold anymore secret.

T: Yeah.

A: We have to say something.

T: Yeah.

A: We went to our grandpa, and I say, “Grandpa. We put it here, more sugar, a lot, like mo—m—m—we, we put it here, something in special, and we put it in your sugar and it’s not coming. Why?”

T: Yeah.

A: He say, “You put the sugar in there?” [A laughs, T laughs] He say, “I know why sugar is, so let’s—you guys are putting in there?”

T: Yeah.

A: He say, “Where?” We took him, we showed him where we put it, we put it everywhere, sugar.

T: Yeah.

A: But the, the, rain is everything mess, everything. And he say, “Okay, I’m gonna, I’m gonna show you something.” He take a pen, and he take a paper...

T: Yeah.

A: And he, he, write it—he’s not writing, he’s just make a picture, like, uh, he, he show us the map for the tree—when the tree grow up, then it make sugar.

T: Right. Right.

A: “So it’s not the way you thinkin’, putting the sugar in the floor.” [A chuckles] We say, “We want it to grow.” “That’s not the way the sugar is supposed to grow up.” [laughs] That’s my sweetest story when I went to farm.

[It is this laughter which permeates her stories. Her endearing sense of humor has been a part of Asma's personality all her life...]

A: I was the only kids who make the, the funny things, terribles, laugh, joke...

T: You're the one who made everyone laugh?

A: Yeah. I was the one who is in the house. My, my other two siblings, they're very quiet, very quiet. They're very quiet. Sometime I fight with the young one, sometime I fight with the second one, because I'm the oldest one, and I play like the middle. I feel like I'm the middle. Like I never take responsibility. I take the responsibility after I grow up for the financial, or like helping for my family, but when I was young, like I crazy, like, um...I don't feel any different age with my, with my sisters. [pause] If the youngest one play something, I play with her. If the middle plays with something, I play with her. I don't put myself—"I'm the oldest, that's not your toy, that's not yours"—no. If she plays with toys, I play with her, I mess her. And my mom she used to say, "You are so messy." [we laugh quietly]

T: So you didn't take control, but you got into everybody else's business.

A: Yeah, yes. And after I grow up, I put my shoulder a lot of responsibility. And...and she told, my mom always told me, "You didn't have...the...your own time. Like, you didn't the teenager's time to, to have your fun, your life—I mean the, the same age you are, you are, you didn't get that time. You grow up like you're nineteen years old, you put your shoulder your responsibility."

[Such a responsibility began even earlier for this eldest sister, and much of it came from her mother's desire to keep Asma and her sisters safe. Alongside all of these joyful memories and moments is an undercurrent of worry about safety.]

A: They're safe, but in Somalia, you cannot call your safe.

T: Yeah.

A: You going outside, somebody shooting you with no reason. You go to shop, there is bomb. Like, ah, do you know what is happen now to Iraq, or what is happen in Libya?

T: Mmm. Yeah I saw that.

A: People, they want to live their life, they go shopping, in their houses, just—other people throwing the bomb for no reason.

T: Yeah.

A: Bomb...They putting the bomb in the street and you're just, uh...uh, driving in your car and the bombs blow you up, you and your car.

T: Yeah.

A: And you didn't did anybody to anything.

T: Yeah.

A: That's what happen. And some they're targeting.

T: Yeah.

A: Some they're targeting for some reason. Um, maybe he just have a good business, he have money, they target him. Mostly, mostly men they targeting that. And if your, one of your family kill another person, they're targeting you, too. So, but mostly the people are dying is people who didn't did anything for anybody.

T: Like your dad.

A: Yes. They...they start like...[sighs] they're a big car who's a...with guns, and mens, they're attacking the whole, whole market. So, people who died, they never even meet them, they never even know them, their names. They just go and attack the, the place."

T: So you're safe, but you're never really safe.

A: You're—you're safe in your own family, and your husband, and your mom, and your kids. You think you're safe, but you sleep you'll never wake up, maybe.

T: Yeah.

A: And something happen to your house. Maybe bomb is throw the house...You're not safe, but you live. If you breathe every day, you wake up every day, you're safe. If that's the safe, they have it. Yeah. But I don't call safe place. Yeah.

[This fear made Asma's mother cautious, and she made sure her daughters were safe by telling them to remain inside when she was working and couldn't protect them.]

A: Yes, my mom made inside because she go to work. And she say, "I'm in the work, so I don't want you to go out guys and happen to you something else."

T: Yeah.

A: But...the normal life we have it?

T: Yeah.

A: Kids play outside all the time.

T: Yeah.

A: But my mom she's worrying about us because nobody looking...at home. We all kids, so she don't want anything happen when we go outside. Some kids try to go outside and run each other and get lost, they, they cannot go back to home, they don't know how to back to home, they gonna lost. So my mom always protecting us like that, but I used to steal it [laughs]. I used to leave and take my chil—I mean, my sisters outside and play, I mean not outside far, far, outside in front of the houses the, other house close to my house, the kids are coming out, those kids are—neighbor, coming out, playing ball or whatever. We, we used to play a lot of...sss...castles.

T: Mhm.

A: Because now here, the castle is just kids finding in the, close to, close to sea, right?

T: Yeah.

A: In Somalia, castles are everywhere, everywhere.

T: You make sand castles everywhere?

A: You can, you can mix the, the mud—Mogadishu is just, it just like, I know there are the big sea, but no matter where you are, in the sea, no matter out in your house... The nature of the, of the ground, just have a lot of castles. I mean, you can make everything you want. I mean, you go in the house, you bring a jug of water and we put it there[laughs], we build like that. Yeah.

T: That's awesome.

A: Yeah, and we used to share the toys, too.

T: Yeah?

A: Yeah, that's beautiful, my kids are never gonna see that nature, I don't know.

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah.

[But there was more to daily life in Somalia than sand castles. Every time they moved, Asma's mother made sure to enroll her daughters in school as soon as they settled down. First, they attended Islamic school—*tuksi*—and then another school, where they learned math, science, and how to read and write in Somalian.]

A: I don't remember how old are me, but I think it was early, early, like three years old, like my son?

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah. And going to school in, in Somalia, don't somebody have to take you in the car.

T: Yeah.

A: You can walk on...[laughs] It's just fun. It's close to house. Everywhere there is the...eh, they call the preschool for the, eh...Um...Islamic school. Everywhere. We call it Islamic school.

[As a single mother with no education of her own, Asma's mother could not afford to send her kids to both schools at the same time, so she started them in Islamic school first, and when Asma completed that, she moved on to the other school at around age eleven.]

A: My school was afternoon—

T: Yeah?

A: Not Islamic school—when I started school, it was the afternoon. First I started school, I become don't know my language. How to write and how to read.

T: You did know, or you didn't know?

A: I didn't know. I didn't how to write and how to read my own language in Somalian because, um...

T: That's right, because you only knew...

A: I only knew Arabic.

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah. So the Qur'an be come in Arabic, so when you are learning the Qur'an at Islamic, Islamic school, so everything is gonna be Arabic.

T: Mhm.

A: So we started in Arabic, alif, A, B, C, D, Arabic.

T: Mhm.

A: We call, alif, bā', tā', ABC in Arabic, we started first when I was young.

T: Right.

A: And then I started how to connect the words, I started how to read, I started how to write, I started how to speak.

T: Right.

A: So it was very difficult. I know how to speak my language as a kid. I know how to speak Arabic, but at school, but when they put me eleven years—I think ten years old, eleven years old, something like that, I don't remember—when they put me in school, some kids are come to early, early than me, so they used to laugh at me. [laughs]

T: Yeah.

A: They used to laugh at me when I don't know how to write. And I was so upset, I come back and I say my mom, "Mommy, you're not..." Um... I tell her, "Mommy, why don't you just put me, just Islamic school all these years?" And she told me, "Because I could only pay one school."

T: Oh, okay.

A: She say, "Religion is the first one. I have to, I have... I need you to know what is your religion first, as a young age. So if you passed, this year, this age, so you not gonna, you're not gonna know your religion, and so you're gonna grow up and you don't wanna interest anything. So I want you to know your religion first, and then school, you can learn any time you wanted."

T: Right.

A: And so I say, “Okay, why you put me late? Because I don’t know how to write?” [laughs]
And she tell me one thing that makes me happy, “You don’t know how to write Somalian, but they don’t know how to write Arabic.”

T: Mmmm.

A: Yeah, and when she told me that, I become happy, I say, “Yes! At least I know, I know some language they don’t know.”

[Despite starting school significantly later than many of her peers, with the help of a kind neighbor, Asma learned to read and write and eventually graduated high school early.]

A: Less than seventeen, I think I graduate. Yeah, there’s no limit—

T: I was gonna say, is that faster than normal? Like, did you...

A: Faster than normal. Faster than normal, yeah.

T: Okay. So you worked hard and you caught up.

A: Exactly. I told my mom, “I have to go, I have to go, I don’t want to stay here.” So getting like, I-I-I was feeling like, um...

T: So you, so you didn’t want to go to school at first, and then you started learning, and you were like, “I want to keep learning and I want to get out of Somalia.”

A: Yes. So, my mom have eh...She was thinking two things. She have girls, and, and how to survive her girls. She was worried about me when I grew up. After I become a, a woman, like my body’s changed, like after sixteen years, she become worried a lot. She watching me sometimes, like I don’t know her, I don’t see my mom, but she’s follow me and watching me, so....She is very scared because some girls are kidnapped and never, never come back.

T: Right.

A: Most girls. Are kidnapped and never come back.

T: Most girls?

A: Most girls, yeah. And most boys, they, they kill them. They just shot them. They’re not gonna kidnap the boys, they just shot them without no reason.

T: Yeah.

A: So my mom was very very worried about me, and my sisters, too. And my sisters were the younger, younger than me even, but she was worried about me more. And when I...when I get the idea for leaving there, she was not having money. She was confused. She was happy to leave the Somalia, but the same time, she don’t have the money to, to take me in...in...yeah. It was very scary, that time.

T: Yeah?

A: Yeah. I see my mom, she never sleep. She work all the day, and she, she cannot go to sleep because she worry a lot. Or she's thinking, how to...

T: How to help you?

A: How to save me, how to help me, how to send me somewhere. And she don't know where to start. Yeah.

[Asma and her mother eventually found a family friend who was leaving Somalia with his own family, so she decided to join him on his journey—first to Dubai, and then on to Syria, where they would part ways. She left Somalia when she was seventeen years old, and she has not seen the country since.]

A: I mean, uh...I can't move back. I don't know how to go back. I think of all my life, the most of my life, I spend out. I think. Now, I'm at thirty-one years old, going back to Somalia...I don't think I—I don't even know if I can understand them.

[fade]